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Ritual as Mediator of Space in Kathmandu

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1. Introduction

The town of Kāṭhmāṇḍu is situated in a valley which only during the past two centuries has come to be the heart of the country of Nepal. In former times, this valley formed one of the important stages on the ancient trade route that connected India and Tibet. Its population during the Middle Ages consisted chiefly of Newars, a Mongoloid people of Tibeto-Burman tongue, who of old are wont to settle in compact settlements. This is in marked distinction to other tribes of Nepal who prefer scattered settlements on the slopes of hills.

Like Pāṭan and Bhaktapur, the two other big Newar towns, Kāṭhmāṇḍu originated from a number of separate nuclei which in the course of time grew together. This process seems to have taken place after AD 1000. It was the 17th century, however, which saw the extension that determines the present state of the city of Kāṭhmāṇḍu: a rectangular grid, deviating by some 15 degrees from the cardinal directions, was superimposed onto the old town. The older pattern is preserved to this day, diagonally cutting through the new outlay. There is no doubt the innovations of the 17th century were due to conscious planning according to principles laid down in the *vāstu-śastra*[1].

The population of Kāṭhmāṇḍu was traditionally Buddhist. Hence, the districts the town in divided into (nepl. *ṭol*, new. *tvaḥ*) were organized round the 18 chief Buddhist monasteries (*mahāvihāra*), who alone held the right of initiation.

The account of the *Pīṭhapūjā* is part of a research project on 'concepts of space' in Nepal (Bhaktapur, Kāṭhmāṇḍu, Pāṭan) and India (Varāṇasi, Mathurā, Purī). Repeated field surveys were made possible by grants of the **German Research Society** (DFG) from 1974–1976.

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I am very much indebted to BERNHARD KÖLVER for discussions on the philosophical interpretations of the *pīṭhapūjā* and translation of this paper into English.

1. *Vāstu-Śāstra*, Vol. I : Hindu Science of Architecture (ed. and transl. by D.N. SHUKLA), Lucknow, without date

This movement had considerable social effects and is clearly mirrored in the structure of Newar towns. Kings not only built a great many temples, but they also installed rites to connect them with each other: thus we see various models of sanctification which aimed at integrating city or kingdom, in order to ensure protection by a particular god or group of gods.

This process entailed a fundamental re-structuring of sacred space : shrines which had been founded immemorial times ago as the seats of pre-Hindu, and probably pre-Buddhist, deities were filled with a new content, were given new interpretations, and thus were absorbed into new spatial patterns.

The idea of organizing space, present in traces from the time of the Upanishads onwards, seems to have been reinforced by the early sects of Tantrik Hinduism. It of course goes back to the old idea of the *pradakṣinā*, i. e. to the need to distinguish between uninhabited and therefore dangerous areas and those which were the seat of human habitatins and their gods[2].

It was not long until the Buddhists adopted such models: although they are at times difficult to reconcile with orthodox Buddhist creed, their emotional appeal must have been such that thinkers made an effort to bring them into line with orthodoxy. It is one of these adaptations that I am about to sketch.

Among the people who are organized around a *mahāvihāra*, the most important group are its Bajrācāryas.Now,members of such families used to form groups in order to perform a ritual called *pīṭhapūjā*.This is, in name, a *pūjā* addressed to the *seats* of certain gods – but according to Tantrik views those advanced in religion can by means of thought proj‹ct a nental image of a deity onto a particular place – and we should remember that among Nepalese Buddhists, the Bajrācāryas are the most advanced group. Hence, it is the Bajrāchāryas more than any others who will be able to perform such aniconic worship.

2. The pīṭhapūjā

2.1 Preliminary remarks

The *pīṭhapūjā* consists in a visit to places which are considered the seats of the Mother Goddesses (*Mātṛkās*), who are eight in number. In their *pīṭhas*, they usually manifest themselves in the shape of unhewn stones. Their sanctuaries may be open shrines, without a building being erected over them, just the delimination being marked (Fig. 3, 4); again, at times a *Mātṛkā* will be housed in a pagoda of up to three roofs (Fig. 2) : in that case, the sanctuary is usually closed at the sides.

2. Joseph Rykwert; *The Idea of a Town; in: Forum voor Architectuur en daarmee verbonden Kunsten;* No. 3, Hilversum 1963, *p.* 99–148
———; *The Idea of a Town–The anthropolgy in Urban form in Rome/Italy and the Ancient World;* 1976
Rykwert suggested, that the cosmological structure of ritual represents 'an irreducible element, an atom of human experience' (p. 139)

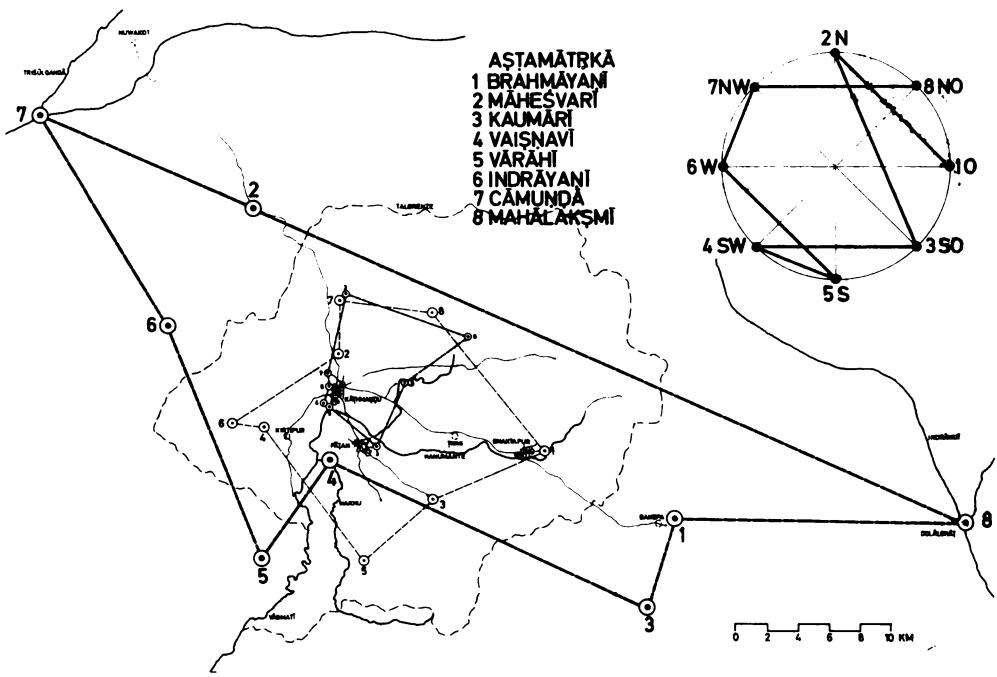


Fig. 1

Valley of Kāṭhmāṇḍu : location of the 24 *mātṛkā pīṭhas* around the city of Kāṭhmāṇḍu, where the Bajrācārya lives, who performs the *caturviṃśatipīṭhapūjā* within one year. The places of worship form three circles or maṇḍalas, which are characterized by the terms *cittacakra, vākcakra* and *kāyacakra*. These belong to the concepts of Tantrik Buddhism.

Mātṛkās are one of the most essential, and indeed most frequent, devices for the sanctification of Nepalese towns[3]. Preferably they are arranged so as to surround settlements – ideally in a pattern where the four cardinal and the four intermediate points of the compass are marked by a shrine each. Hence, in Nepal they are invariably eight in number.

The ideal symmetrical pattern (which we find expressed in a *maṇḍala*) is of course in reality modified by the two factors of topography and of history: that is, by the structure of the terrain, and by a tendency to use shrines of older gods and goddesses, which were re– interpreted and newly consercrated, to fit into the new system.

Hence, in the earliest layer accessible to us through Nepalese materials (which seems Hindu in character), the eight *Mātṛkās* are used to define *space*. There is little doubt that this is an essential feature even in the Buddhist adaptation we shall deal with presently. We shall however see an esoteric interpretation superposed on this.

2.2 Spatial distribution

The *pīṭhapūjā* consists of 24 shrines of *Mātṛkās* being visited. The ritual used to be performed by a group of Bajrācāryas all coming from the same *mahāvihāra;* they took a year to complete it, one shrine being visited every half of the lunar month.

The 24 shrines are arranged in three sets of eight *Mātṛkās* each : the same sequence of *Mātṛkās* is affirmed to exist in three separate and widening circles.

First of all, let us look at topography. The first of these circles by and large surrounds the city of Kāṭhmāṇḍu, the second the entire valley, and the third at times transcends the boundaries of the valley proper to include places traditionally under the spiritual – and at most times also secular – domination of Newar kings.

3. For the significance of the *Aṣṭamātṛkā* in connection with urban space see:
N. Gutschow, B. Kölver; *Ordered Space – Concepts and Functions in a Town in Nepal;* Wiesbaden 1975
B. Kölver; *A Ritual Map from Nepal;* in: Folia Rara (Festschrift W. Voigt), Wiesbaden 1976
J. Pieper; *Three Cities of Nepal;* in: *Shelter, Sign & Symbol,* ed. by Paul Oliver; London 1975, p. 52–70

Fig. 2
Kathmandu : Camunda pith (also called Luti Ajima) at the banks of Bisnumati (Nr. 7, northwest of *cittacakra*).
The goddess is represented by an unhewn stone in the open groundfloor, looking northwards. The three tiered pagoda serves to mark the sacred place.
Several smaller buildings (*pauva*) serve as shelter for those who attend the *puja* or a cremation at the nearby Masan Ghat.

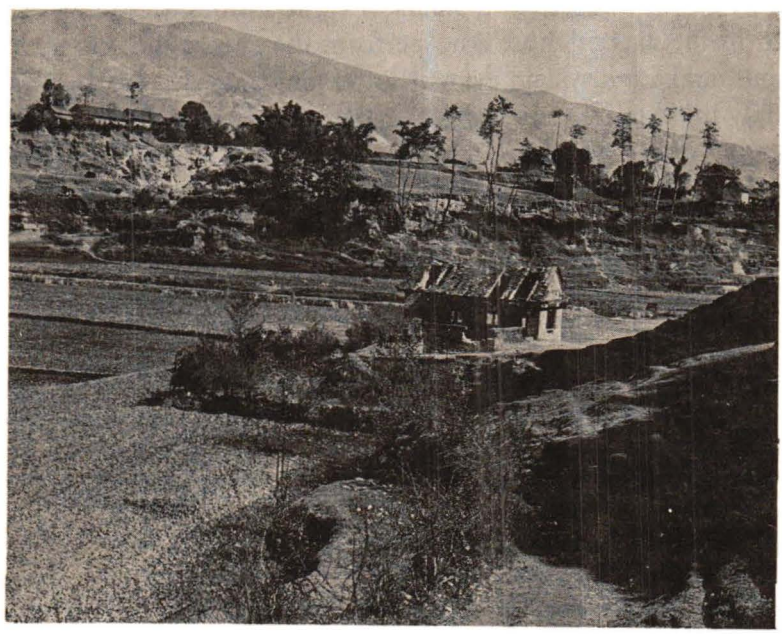


Fig. 3
Gokarna : Mahalaksmi pith (also called Gokarnesvari) at the banks of Bagmati, north of the village of Gokarna (No. 8, northeast of *cittacakra*). The sacred place is only marked by an one-storeyed open structure (*pauva*). The roof is already falling apart, signalizing growing neglect of place and ritual.

As for the *first circle,* this extends from Guhyeśvarī and Gokarṇa in the east up to the banks of the Biṣṇumatī in the west, including a shrine from Pāṭan (*Balkaumārī*), which is, in another context, the seat of one of the *Aṣṭamātṛkā* of Pāṭan.[4] The *second polygon* is made up of sanctuaries farther away from the centre : we find the easternmost of the Bhaktapur *Mātṛkās* (*Brahmāyaṇī*) just as shrines of smaller Newar settlements such as Lubhu (*Kaumārī*) and Sattungal (*Indrāyaṇī*).

The *third circle* spans the wide gap between the two groups of Seven Rivers (Saptakauśikī and Saptagaṇḍakī)[5] which encase the heart of Nepal : its *Mahālakṣmī* is found far east at the confluence of Indravatī and the Sunkośī Rivers, in the north west we find *Cāmuṇḍā* at the confluence of Triśulgaṅgā and Tadhikola. The two important Newar settlements outside the valley, Panauti and Banepa, are also visited in this cirle.

Up to this point, the system is not essentially different from that preserved in traditional, pseudo-historical accounts, the so-called *Vaṁśāvalīs:* these contain similar repeated systems of *Aṣṭamātṛkās* which indicate the sanctification of successive units : first the capital, then the Valley, then the entire Kingdom.[6]

The Bajrācārya *pīṭhapūjā,* however, differs from those in one essential respect : the shrines visited were not installed with this particular *pūjā* in mind. The connection between the three systems of eight shrines each only exists in the minds and in the acts of those who perform the ritual; there is no visual trace which would make the system evident to the uninitiated. Again : the system is realized only in time, in its actual performance.[7] Certain places are assembled to form an imaginary *maṇḍala :* and the fact that this *maṇḍala* is hidden from the eye of the uninitiated vouches for its significance, 'for', as the Bṛhad-āraṇyaka-upaniṣad says, 'the gods as it were love what is hidden' (*parokṣapriyā iva hi devāḥ,* BĀU 4, 2, 2).

4. It seems strange to see No. 6 of *cittacakra* noted as *Indrāyaṇī* and No. 7 as *Cāmuṇḍā,* although in the context of the City *Aṣṭamātṛkās* it is the other way round.
5. *Bhāṣāvaṃśāvalī* 1, Kāṭhmāṇḍu 2020 V.S., p. 41 or: A. *Oldfield: Sketches of Nipal,* Vol, I: London 1880; p. 27
6. *Bhāṣāvaṃśāvalī* 1, Kāṭhmāṇḍu 2020 V.S., p. 31
7. E. v. ERODBERG-CONSTEN; *Zeit und Raum in der Geomantik;* in: *Stadt und Landschaft – Raum und Zeit,* Festschrift für Erich KÜHN; Köln 1969 An excellent account on interrelations of symbols for time and space. Were the *piṭhapūjā* not performed in Buddhist context we would have dealt with interpretations based on the number 24 representing the 24 sections of the solar year.

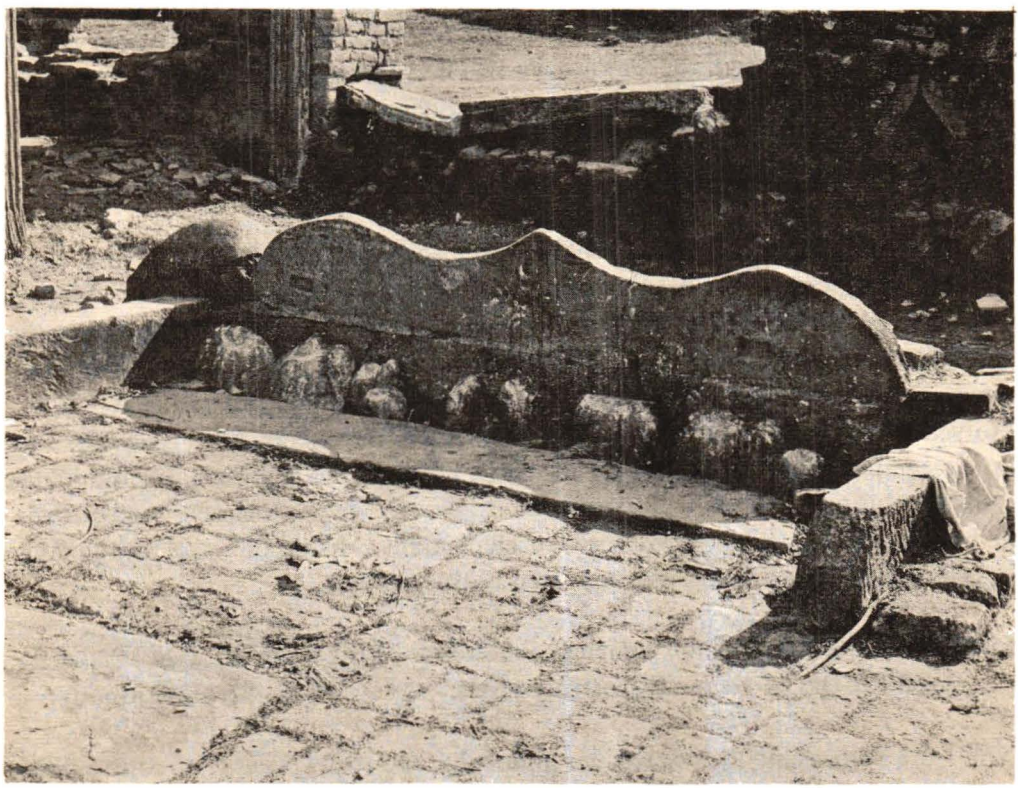


Fig. 4.
Gokarṇa : Mahālakṣmī pīṭh. The goddes (*mātṛkā*) is represented by a row of ten unhewn stones, showing marks (colour) of ritual use.

3. Patterns of interpretation

We will now have to try and understand the significance of the ritual. This attempt cannot be more than a first approximation.

We have seen how on the most elementary and transparent level the ritual defines the territory which is the home of the worshipper, the home of his creed. The interpretation which the Bajrācārya will consider more important, however, is hinted at by the three terms which serve to characterize the three *mandalas*: these are *cittacakra, vākcakra* and *kāyacakra*. These terms belong to the concepts of Tantrik Buddhism.

Tantrik thought is based upon Sāṃkhya philosophy, which departs from a fundamental distinction, that between soul and matter (*puruṣa* and *prakṛti*). Matter consists of 24 substances (*tattvas*) of ever grosser structure. Both the human body and the world outside are composed of these 24 substances : hence to the initiated, the distinction between the outside world and the self is, as it where, resolved : both of them are made up of the same components, both illustrate the same principles, hence mastery over the self – which at the highest stage culminates in the resolution of individual existence– is achieved by conscious control over the human body, i. e. the substances or elements it consists of – and recognizing these elements is a first and essential step in this process.

Here, then , is a second plane which is symbolized by the vistit to the 24 Mothers : they stand for the 24 elements (*tattvas*) of the world and of the human body.

(Note: the 25th element of Sāṃkhya philosphy, the soul (*puruṣa*) of course does not occur in a Buddhist context).

Now, according to Tantrik teaching the body holds a number of nerve centres, plexuses, *cakras* (as the Sanskrit term goes), which are of particular importance in the process of achieving mastery over the body. Hindu Tantras lists seven such *cakras*.[8] When the Buddhists came to reflect upon this system, they identified these cakras of the body with the 'Three Bodies' (*trikāya*) of the Buddha.[9] Although these stem from an altogether different source, they determined the Buddhist version of the list of the *cakras* within the body. Thus, some Buddhist Tantras distinguish between three *cakras* ; the Hevajratantra says that there is a lowest *cakra* close to the heart, a second one in the throat, and a third one in the head.

8. Shashi Bhushan DAS GUPTA; *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism.* (Sec. Ed.), Berkeley and London 1974, pp. 146–153
9. A.K. WARDER; *Indian Buddhism;* New Delhi 1970, pp. 412

In the three designations of its *cakras,* the Bajrācārya ritual obviously refers to this system. The *first* and outermost *circle,* the *kāyacakra* 'circle of body', is located in the region of the forehead and corresponds to the *nirmāṇakāya* of the Buddha, i. e. his corporeal aspect : it stands for the Buddha or Bhuddhas as they appear in human guise : they are a mere reflection of the Buddha principle.

The *second cakra* is in the works of the Bajrācārya called *vākcakra* 'circle of word or speech' : it is located in the throat and stands for the *saṃbhogakāya* of the Buddha, i.e. for the Buddha when he appears as the 'King of the Doctrine'; if we stick to the image contained in the words 'throat' or 'speech', we are justified to say the Bajrācārya refers to the teachings of the Buddha, such as they have been uttered.

The highest, *innermost circle* is to the Bajrācārya, *cittacakra* the *'cakra* of thought': this signifies the *svabhāvakāya* or *dharmakāya* of the Buddha, i. e. the proper and true Nature of Things, far beyond the confusing and indeed misleading world of phenomena : permanent and immoveable, it is in a sense the Perfection of Wisdom which is the (unspeakable) essence of Buddhist thought.

Let us not forget that applying the theory of the nerve centres to the aspects of the Buddha is but one of the interpretations this system can be subjected to. It is just as correct, just as orthodox, to apply it to the human body : that is, to the three realms of the senses, of speech (taken as the embodiment of thought), and of Highest Bliss or Highest Truth, which a person will reach when he has mastered the preceeding stages–and which he will variously define, as Emptiness, or as Perfection of Wisdom.

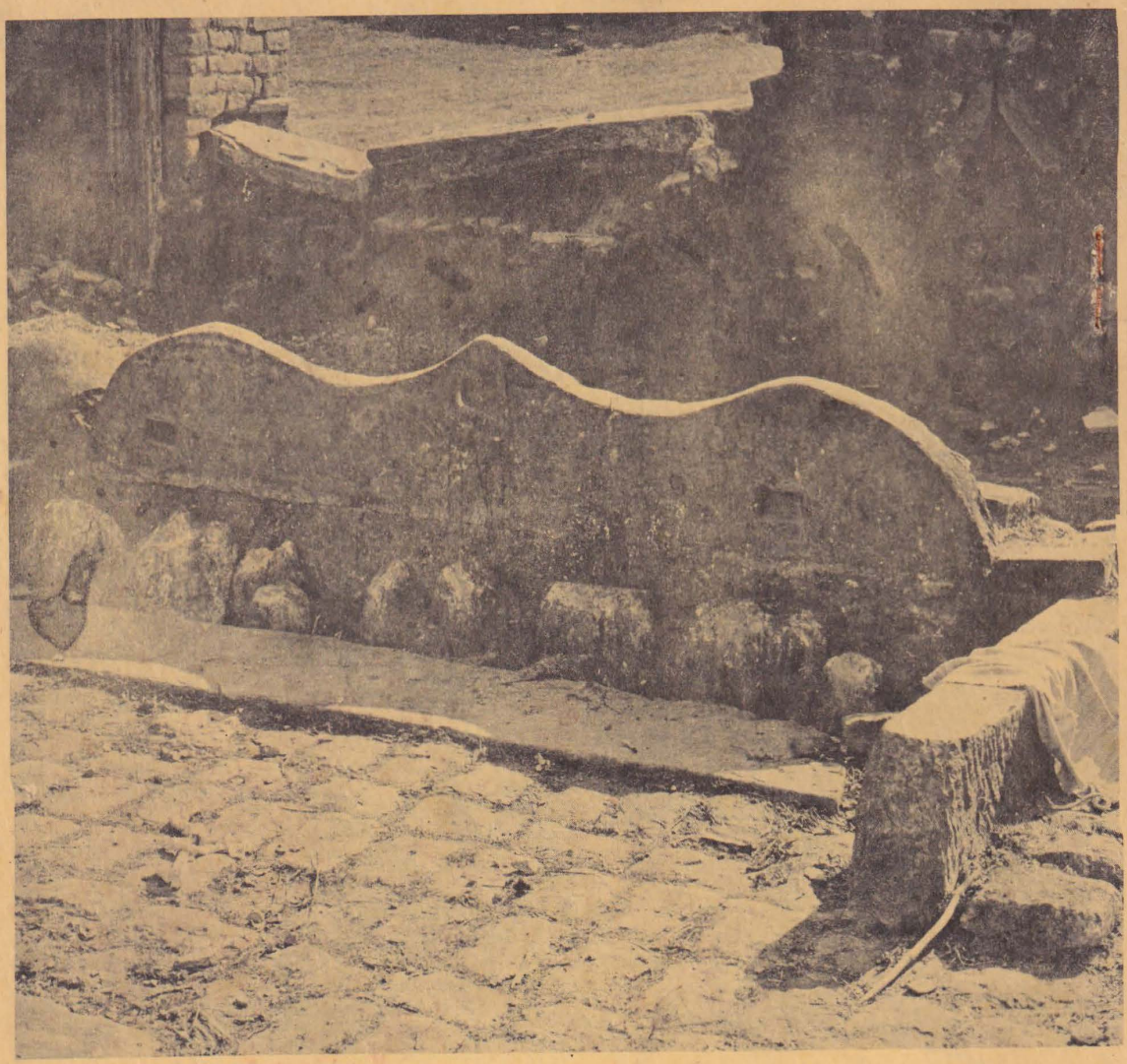
Again : on one plane we can say the Bajrācārya affirms that his country stands for the three ways in which the Buddha and his teachings become manifest in the world. On another plane : his pilgrimage makes him realize how the world he inhabits, the world characterized by Newar culture, is mirrored in his body, is identiacal with it. It is very secular, very Western to take this idea as an image, as a symbol of how a human being is embedded in his culture, is rooted in his soil : yet this is true, though this could be considered a very superficial and indeed marginal interpretation of what the Bajrācārya is doing. And the very image can be turned the other way round, without loosing its truth or value: his way outside, his visit to the *pīṭhas,* is a way into his own self: the essence of his own physical and psychical structure very directly stands for the country he lives in, stands for the essence of the doctrine he follows.

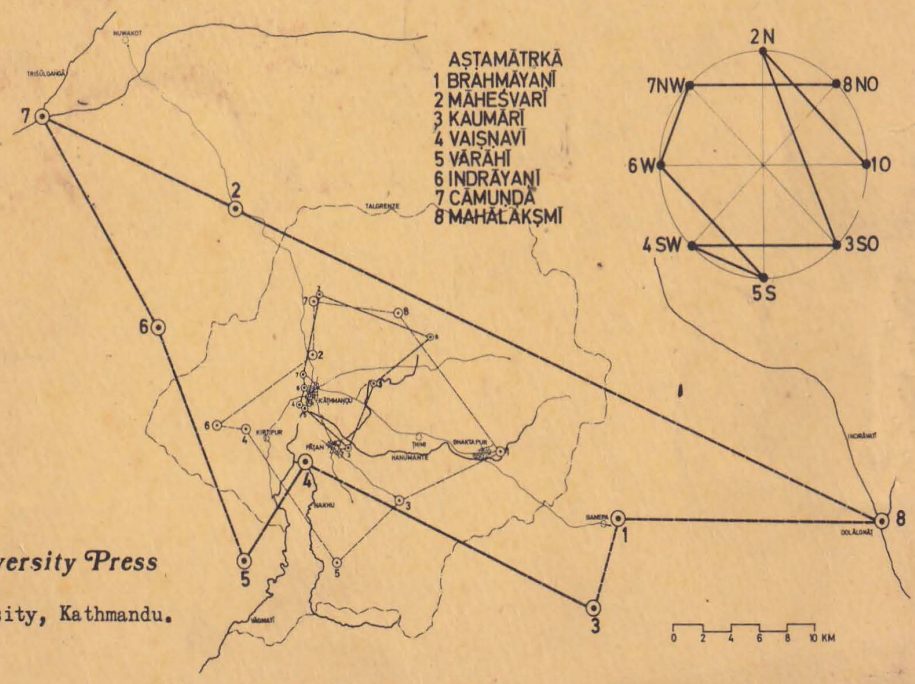
Outside of Hindu or Buddhist culture, it will be hard to find a similar instance of intellectual subtlety and complexity being translated into a symbol of direct appeal.

Appendix :

Direction, name and location of the 24 mātṛkā. – *Caturviṁśati Pīṭha*

1.	Circle – Prathama cittacakra-mātṛkā				
1.	1. *pūrva* (E)	: Brahmāyaṇī	pīṭh	(Guhyeśvarī)	Paśupati – Sāntatīrtha
2.	2. *uttara* (N)	: Maheśvarī	pīth	(Manamaijū)	Tokhā-Manorathatīrtha
3.	3. *agni* (SE)	: Kaumārī	pīth	(Śaṃkareśvarī)	Śaṃkhamūla – Śaṃkarathīrtha
4.	4. *nairṛtya* (SW)	: Vaiṣṇavī	pīth	(Jñaneśvarī)	Karha Khusī – Jñānatīrtha
5.	5. *dakṣiṇa* (S)	: Vārāhī	pīth	(Majyeśvarī)	Bāgmatī-Pacalī Rājatīrtha
6.	6. *paścima* (W)	: Indrāyanī	pīth	(Kaṃkeśvarī)	Biṣṇumatī – Lakhutīrtha
7.	7. *vāyavya* (NW)	: Cāmuṇḍā	pīṭh	(Lutī Ajimā)	Bhacā Khusī – Nirmalatīrtha
8.	8. *Īśāna* (NE)	: Mahālakṣmī	pīth	(Gorkarṇeśvarī)	Gokarṇa – Puṇyatīrtha
2.	Circle – Dvitīya vākcakra-mātṛkā				
9.	1. *pūrva* (E)	: Brahmāyaṇī	pīṭh		Khopayāpine Vantāṃkṣetra
10.	2. *uttara* (N)	: Maheśvarī	pīṭh		Mhayepī (near Balajū)
11.	3. *agni* (SE)	: Kaumārī	pīṭh		Lubhu
12.	4. *nairṛtya* (SW)	: Vaiṣṇavī	pīṭh		Balakhu Khusī (south of Kīrtipur)
13.	5. *dakṣiṇa* (S)	: Vajravārāhī	pīṭh		Wādeśa (Cāpāgāum)
14.	6. *paścima* (W)	: Indrāyaṇī	pīṭh		Sattuṃgala
15.	7. *vāyavya* (NW)	: Cāmuṇḍā	pīṭh		Phusīṃkhyaḥ
16.	8. *iśāna* (NE)	: Mahālakṣmī	pīṭh		Kantināmadeśa
3.	Circle – Tritīya kāyacakra–mātṛkā				
17.	1. *pūrva* (E)	: Brahmāyaṇī	pīṭh		Bhoṃta Caṇḍeśvarī (Banepā)
18.	2. *uttara* (N)	: Maheśvarī	pīṭh		Kapilāsa
19.	3. *agni* (SE)	: Kaumārī	pīṭh		Panautī
20.	4. *nairṛtya* (SW)	: Vaiṣṇavī	pīṭh		Yappā (south of Pāṭan)
21.	5. *dakṣiṇa* (S)	: Vārāhī	pīṭh		Dakṣiṇa Kālī
22.	6. *paścima* (W)	: Indrāyaṇī	pīṭh		Gokhudeśa
23.	7. *vāyavya* (NW)	: Cāmuṇḍā	pīṭh		Triśulī Devīghāṭ (near Nuwākoṭ)
24.	8. *Īśāna* (NE)	: Mahālakṣmī	pīṭh		Dolālghāṭ





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